

1-1-1977

De Vries, Ben and Mildred Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Dick, Bill, "De Vries, Ben and Mildred Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (1977). *Class Projects*. Paper 35. http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/35

Published in: *English 113 Oral History Interviews (1977) (H90-1096)*, January 1, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview

(We talked for a few minutes before the tape was on about Foxfire and Bill's and Mr. and Mrs. DeVries mutual friends.)

Bill: Well I guess we've got a few questions here.

Dick: I guess the thing that we were most interested in is the times you were missionaries.

B: Yes, we thought it would be a sort of good "human interest" story.

Mrs: Well, we went to India in 1929. That's a long time ago.

(Mr. chuckles) We were affiliated with the Reformed Church.

Are you with the reformed church? (To Dick)

B: No, I'm with the Swedish Covenant.

Mr: Would you like a map of India to look at before you get going?

D: I think that was our first question. (Mr. laughs with his deep voice) Where in India were you located?

Mrs: (to Mr.) Do you think I can find that map I've got upstairs?
I'll get it.

Mr: No, not the one I'm thinking of. I think I can find one though down here. I don't know which you've got up there.
Pause

Mrs: Madras is here. (Points) We were about 90 miles from there.
Well, 90 miles from this coast.

B: Madras?

Mrs: Yes, Madras, it's a big city. About 3 million.

B: It's a pretty good sized town then.

Mr: And you can still see cows. I haven't been there yet when you wouldn't see cows wandering around the city.

B: Oh really, even now?

Mrs: Oh yes, cows are sacred.

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D: Have you been back?

Mrs: Oh yeah, we were back. We retired in 65 and we went back in 72 for 87 days.

D: To visit?

Mrs: Yes, just to visit it was very nice, you know we didn't have any responsibilities but we knew alot of people.

D: Yes, you probably aquired alot of friends over the years.

Mrs: Oh yes, we were there for 36 years you know.

D: 36? WOOD: Thats a long time.

Mrs: Yes, well it was our life. Well, we were 90 miles from here. Well I don't know if I can find Katpati or not. You see this is in Tamil.

Mr: Small village on there.

D: How big is India, well, compared to the United States?

Mrs: It's not as large as the United States. Its about, ah...

Mr: About two thirds now with Pakistan knocked off, and Bangaldish.

(laughs) I mean it depends on what period you are talking about.

D: Were you in a little village? Or-

Mrs: Well, we lived in diffrent places. We lived in Katpati. Thats actually a railroads junction between achas and Bangalore.

D: Bangalore is another big city?

Mr: Bangalore is another big city, yes. That was in World War two. We were there in the days of the Briti rule. Ya, we were under British rule. We were there until 1947. And then Mysore was just a little town.

Mr: Just a railway junction.

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Mrs: But we lived out of town about a mile and a half or so. And we had a long driveway from the road to the Bungalow they called it. It was about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile and on either side there was nice big trees. They were planted when we were there and they were just little. And we had a man to water them and put a fence around them to keep the cows out. And now they are great big trees. When we went there my husband was in charge of motor training. You see in those days Indian men who were wealthy enough to have a car, they were wealthy enough to have, well what they called a car boy. You know, a man to drive it. Because you see they were cast people and that was beneath them. Of course, now there are lots of cars in India.

Mr: (pointing to map) Here is the city of Madras. This is the Bay of Bengal.

Mrs: Just get nearer Bill.

Mr: That's Bangalore isn't it?

B: Yes, that's Bangalore.

Mr: Kalicut and some others are in along the coast here. You'll find them I can't---

B: There's Kalicut.

Mrs: Yes, we were near there. It was a nights journey to there.

B: Is you were between Madras and Bangalore?

Mr: Yes.

Mrs: Yes, about half way.

Mr: I don't think Malpalli is on this map.

Mrs: Belore. There's Belore. Between about five miles north of Belore.

Mr: Were between Belore and Chetore. North and south, at the railway junction. The smaller line south, the old line, that was

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the narrow gauge.

D: So were you in the same place the whole time?

Mr: No. Not in the same residence. In the same district. The same language area.

Mrs: You see, we were in the North Arcott district and we are called the Arcott Mission because it was established in the north Arcott district and the south Arcott district, that's why it's called the American Arcott Mission.

B: I see.

Mr: Part of the mission was in the Chetore area, which is the term for the first residence, but now Chetore is a district but it's under a state. And the north and south Arcott are in the Midras state since independence has been granted. The different terminologies and so forth.

B: Are there different languages spoken?

Mr: Yes, Midras is on the borderline, Chetore is on the borderline and Palminore, which is a part of our mission station. From here on there were nine or ten different languages spoken.

Mrs: We were in a Tamil area. We learned Tamil. Then you see just twenty miles from us were the Telitute.

Mr and Mrs: (Dable, Dable??) -

Mrs: When we went out in '08 we had 42 missionaries, Americans.

Mr: And now we have, well, I don't know.

B: Who were in charge of like how big an area?

Mr: Your speaking of population.

Mrs: Now our Arcott was about 200 miles by about 50 miles and that was our area.

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MR: This was for the Reformed Church.

Mrs: Now to one side were the Missouri Lutherans and down further the American Lutherans. Then down near Midras is the Scottish Presbyterian and the Anglicans. But you see we all work our area.

Mr: Its what you call the comity of missions. Territories were sort of distributed to different church groups from different Missions. England, Germany, Germany was near Calacut where they set up a cloth weaving factory.

Mrs: We had a man from another mission. And we had village schools. And some of these schools were nearer the Lutheran Mission so we asked them if they would take over these schools. They said oh yes. Because they were nearer their area than ours. So they came over and our missionary said, yes well you know this is a good school and you must give me a price for this.

Mr: Yes, it was a money deal cause they were taking it over and we had money invested in it. And our man said it goes to a good cause.

Mrs: Then the other fellow says, well we're working for the same boss aren't we?

Mr: That was some of the humor we had over there.

Mrs: Oh you have to have a sense of humor if you work in India. Especially you get so down you know.

Mr: You see a lot of sickness and poverty.

Mrs: Yes, poverty and so many people. The children are so skinny and their stomachs are all bloated and suffering from Malaria. But its a underprivileged country, no doubt about it.

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Mrs: But our people are mainly of the lower cast. The upper class calls them out casts. They are the lowest of the sow. But that doesn't mean they don't have any brains. But they just have been held down for years and years.

D: Is it part of your job to feed them and care for them?

Mr: Well there are periods of famine in one part or another of India most of the time and there has been for centuries. Early when our mission was first established there was a period of famine in our area. And out of that grew the term, "Rice Christians". Well the land didn't produce enough food for em and they didn't have money to buy food so there was aid sent and our missionaries were in charge of that. So they provide grain, chiefly rice for these people to eat. Then in return, out of gratitude, they would be willing to listen to the gospel. Many of them came from this laboring class. Landowners had enough to live on. They produced the crops. The day laborers were often in dept all their lives to land owners who would advance them grain against their work for the next year. So they were in a sense slaves. But not in a defined sense. But in practice almost that. Because they had to work off the dept on grain that he had supplied them to carry them over.

Mrs: See what you were saying, they were paid a low cash for a days work. They didn't get so much rice, or so much grain. You know that they could use for food. Most of our people were poor. And in India, you know, not many Christians owned land. They say, you know, I have 50 worth of land. Now that was five hundredths of an acre. Five hundredths of an acre! That's not

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very much. Most of the land was owned by landlords.

Mr: The large tracts were all owned by the more wealthy. And the inheritance rules have been that the males shared in the land inheritance. You see, if one had five acres at one time, after a few generations the land gets split up and split up. And the plots are laid out at water level for most of these are for rice, because that's flooded. The dry crops, so called, are at different elevations over small hills and even now they're going up on the hillides and contouring.

Mrs: You know there just isn't enough land....

Mr: It's all owned by the government that isn't deeded to a person. The rest so called reserve forest, theres just heaps of Reserve forest. And when we came within two miles of the industrial schoolresidence where we lived were reserved lands and hills not unlike that picture there, that shows, see those hills there up in the distance? (Pointing to a picture on living room wall) Well the water runs down from those hills, if it rains, is caught in big earthen dams or tanks with the means to let it out. And this is what they call wet land and it carries a fairly heavy tax. But towards the hills the elevation is too great to get it from these catchment basins thats called dry land well one tenth maybe depending on how good it is. And that depends on rainfall unless they can dig a well deep enough to get up the water, then they will have wet crops. And rice is the chief one, but sugar cane is high. When we visited that was a man who had some five acres of land, he's had it almost all in sugar cane. Because his final price was better

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for sugar cane than it was for rice at that time. And sugar was one of the big exports from that particular area.

Mrs: When we were there....

Mr: That's got a market in the U.S. They can get U.S. dollars for their sugar and with those dollars they want to buy U.S. machinery.

Mrs: So they rationed their own people, you see when we were there in 1960 we were rationed with sugar and we got oh... about a pound a week for us. Well that isn't very much. A pound of sugar, well, we had lots of guests, there were no hothels of motels, so I went to this man and I said, "Its very inadaquate for our purpose, could I, would it be possible for you to give us some more." "Oh yes, he said, Instead of a pound, we'll give you a pound and a half." What we did, you see, how we got over that was our Indian people, they had a ration card too. They would buy it, and we would buy it from them and with the money we gave them, they would buy bative brown sugar. It was cheaper and not rationed.

Mr: Actually, most of our sweeting came from native brown sugar which has fine flavor. Well you know brown suger that has that fine flavor but

Mrs: Is that all you want some (goes to kitchen)

Mr: Well, I want a little the other day. (laughs) They don't have much of it in the part. You can let them try it. You can judge for yourself. We had servants in the home. For instance, many years ago refrigeration and my wife needed stuff like that
----- subjects on diet is being said-----

Associated with the trade school we didn't have just the boys but right here was a factory. Some of this furniture is the

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product of that factory that is real special. That chair you're sitting on, (Points to Bill) that table that desk and

B: That looks like real good hand crafting.

D: Who made it?

Mr: The students, some of them would go out and get jobs. We did furniture of major building, hospitals, churches and schools along with the others and so there were times when we had building work where Vander Werdes are which is about one hundred miles north and one hundred miles south and inbetween Christian Medical College in Velore which is a hospital part which is twenty five miles from the industrial school. Some days we'd go twice a day to inspect the building work there.

D: How did you get around?

Mr: Car. We had motor mechanics course we offered.

Mrs: (Comes in with sugar) Here, we'll let you both have a little taste. Its good isn't it?

D: It does taste like brown sugar.

Mr: Well thats the nearest thing we had to it.

Mrs: Well honey, let them ask questions, we're getting aside here.

B: What training did you have to do to go over to India? I imagin you had to learn the language.

Mrs: Not here, we did that there.

B: You learned it as you went?

Mr: No. We had schools. When I was asked to go they asked me if I would teach the boys motor mechanics, so I've had college and post graduate work before then and we worked two years in Annville Kentucky. Thats where I met Max and then we wanted to